

Orchestra's season ends on a grand note

BY DERYK BARKER
Times Colonist staff

In October 1907, the two leading symphonists of their generation met for the only time in Helsinki. The much-quoted exchange between Jean Sibelius and Gustav Mahler — Sibelius admiring the “severity of style and profound logic” of the symphony, Mahler declaring that it must be “like the world, all embracing” — tells us much about where the two composers had arrived in their maturity (Sibelius was 42, Mahler 47), but little about their respective routes to that point.

In fact both men began composing large-scale symphonies: Sibelius' *Kullervo* of 1892 — a five-movement monster for soloists, choir and orchestra — can bear comparison with Mahler's *Resurrection* symphony, which it predates by three years.

But the story of Sibelius' symphonic

REVIEW

Who: Civic Orchestra of Victoria

Susu Robin, piano

George Corwin, conductor

Where: Alix Goolden Performance Hall

When: May 3

progress is toward an ever greater economy of expression, whereas Mahler continued to utilise vast timescales while his orchestration became more sophisticated and chamber-like.

Sibelius' first numbered symphony dates from 1899.

Its composer was still under the influence of Romanticism and, in particular, Tchaikovsky — “There is much in that man that I recognize in myself” he wrote to his wife, yet there is scarcely a bar that could have been composed by any other hand.”

George Corwin directed the Civic

Orchestra in an outstanding performance of the symphony on Saturday night. Corwin not only gets the very best from his players, but is also that increasingly *rara avis*, a conductor who can perform exactly what is in the score and yet produce not a characterless, generic reading, but one of real insight — even magic.

From the ominous, pregnant opening — emerging almost imperceptibly from the traffic noise — to the final, despairing pizzicatos, this was one of the most involving, most heartfelt performances I have ever heard, one which I would not have missed for anything.

Grieg's only concerto for piano is his most popular work — and deservedly so. Unfortunately, as with many “popular classics,” its very popularity tends to undermine its effect. Most of us have heard too many performances, with too little to distinguish them.

Pianist Susu Robin, however, obvi-

ously has her own feelings about the music and there was nothing bland or by-the-numbers about her playing — or the accompaniment — as was evident from her powerful and dramatic playing of the famous opening bars.

The Grieg concerto is not, though, a competition between soloist and orchestra and I am delighted to report that Robin did not (unlike some I have heard) treat it as if it were; when the orchestra had the main thematic interest, she was quite prepared to accompany.

Throughout the performance, the interplay and balances between soloist and accompaniment were excellent; Robin produced some delectable keyboard colours (particular in the slow movement) and her shaping of the first-movement cadenza showed a musician with a good sense of narrative.

A memorable close to a memorable season. The Civic Orchestra continues to go from strength to strength.